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Concepts of play informing aspects of the design studio

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ABSTRACT

Play is often seen as an unproductive yet structured pastime intended to provide enjoyment to its participants. For young children play is seen as a vital aspect to the learning process, gearing young minds in all aspects of role playing, socialization and understanding the material and making of the world. Play is a conduit for the imagination and though seemingly unproductive sows the seeds for creativity and understanding of the world.

Why not then can't we see the value of play as seen in young children through a slightly different lens to reveal ways of looking at the design studio pedagogy. After all our craft is one where imagination, creativity, problem solving and collaboration are at the core of our practice. On one level play is seen as unproductive time though on another it provides vital rehearsals and experimentation for future action in life. Perhaps if we revalue play we need to let go of some of the prescriptions and assumed outcomes and accept the value of experimentation for its own sake, whether or not the outcome is seen as successful within defined parameters.

This paper will explore the various aspects of design pedagogy through the lens of play and how it may challenge understandings of assessment and outcomes, group work and collegiality in the studio. It will also look to the importance of synthesizing multiple aspects of design through making, trial and error and even failure as important rehearsals for imaginative, creative and adaptable future design professionals.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Queensland first year architecture program has run a kindergarten design program over the past three years from 2007 through to 2009. When liaising with the kindergarten directors it is almost irresistible to draw parallels between what occurs in the structured activities of four and five year olds with problem based studio projects in an architecture program.

Though it is not a surprise that the primary mode of learning in early childhood is through play could we perhaps utilise some aspects of the play desire in adults to develop ways of enhancing creativity, generate deeper engagement with

course aims as well as making our graduates more adaptable in a rapidly changing technical environment.

I. PLAY IN AN ADULT CONTEXT

Competition to secure one's place in society through primary and secondary schooling demands that one becomes more serious and play gradually gives over to work. Play and work are seen not to mix. One of the primary properties of play is its *apparent purposeless* (Brown and Vaughan: 2009: 17). Play is enjoyed for its own sake; it is in part what makes us human. Brown describes that play is *voluntary*, it has an *inherent attraction*, it has a *freedom from time* and a *diminished consciousness of self*. (2009:17)

Creativity or rather creative people and playfulness have often been seen to be linked, though playful not as in childish behavior and such playfulness is usually always linked to discipline and hard work. (Csikszentmihalyi: 1996: 61 and Dacey and Lennon: 1998: 115). Vygotsky's theory of creative imagination is constructed of four tenets; firstly that imagination is the internalisation of child's play, imagination is directed consciously, creative thinking involves the collaboration of imagination and thinking in concepts and artistic creativity requires such collaboration between imagination and thinking in concepts. (Smolucha and Smolucha, 1986: 2)

Internalisation of child's play evolves to fantasy and conjuring images of things and places that do not exist. In essence a design process leads from the imagination which conjures a real but at the same time unreal, or non-existent thing. In a way the virtual nature of design can be seen in part like a game of make believe – with active role playing assisting its development throughout.

There is a view that play may act as a catalyst for creativity through regression. Ernst Kris described that a childlike state of mind can weaken the barriers between the conscious and unconscious mind allowing information to be combined to view problems in a new way. (Dacey and Lennon: 1998: 38).

This alignment of the various aspects of conscious and unconscious thought is described as being in an "ego-syntonic" state. (Smolucha and Smolucha: 1989: 3)

“In such an ego-syntonic state, the adult personality would experience enjoyment and a sense of relaxed fulfillment during play that would be most conducive to the fullest expression of the individual’s creativity” (Smolucha and Smolucha: 1989: 3)

One of Stuart Brown’s descriptors of play is that it has a *freedom from time* (2009:17). This state of diminished self consciousness in a *ego-syntonic* state is described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as *flow*. (1990: 71) Concentration on the task is at an intensity that there is no capacity for thoughts external to the immediate task at hand and the sense of gratification and pleasure received exist outside of concerns what they will get out of it. (Csikszentmihalyi: 1990: 71)

The parallels between *flow* and play stem from the same effect of gratification that exists outside of aspects such as remuneration. Pleasure is in the task itself. Flow is difficult to sustain. Csikszentmihalyi describes the propensity for flow as a product of the relationship between the challenge of the task and one’s skill. (1990: 74) For a student there may be frustration experienced is the challenge exceeds the skill or boredom when a highly skilled student is not challenged. Csikszentmihalyi charts the relationship between skill and challenge with the resulting intersection defined as the *flow channel*. (see fig 1) Particularly during an early stage of their education, pleasure and deep engagement which can be described as byproducts of flow can be perhaps triggered when placed in a framework of play.

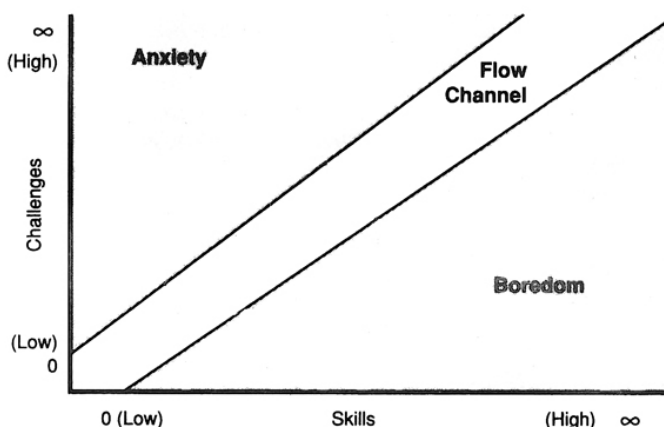


Fig. 1. The flow channel as a function of the relationship between challenges and skills. (Csikszentmihalyi: 1990: 74)

Play can allow us to take risks within clearly defined rules of engagement that extend beyond orthodoxy. A situation can be constructed to give license to those engaging in the game to attempt new approaches to seek new outcomes. For a student who has been drilled to be risk adverse through adolescence, the playful context may be a strategy to trigger creativity. Such risk taking can be afforded additional license within a social setting or group play. The enjoyment of games and play is heightened in a group context and allows an increase in possible tangents and connections to enhance the creative process.

II. DEMONSTRATION PROJECT: CARDBOARD SITE PODS

In 2008 a field work exercise for a group of first year students from the University of Queensland was organised that required at least 1 overnight stay. The destination was well provided with accommodation though it tended to be expensive and difficult to arrange for the 130 participants. Though camping was an option it was decided to extend the activity and ask students to construct their own shelters. From what initially started as an almost playful afterthought evolved into the cardboard site pods exercise an forms a major aspect of the first year experience.

The execution of the first iteration of the project drew parallels with play through observing the way students approached the project in a light hearted but also quite serious and deeply involved way. It seemed in many instances that students were returning to favorite or deprived aspects of their childhood “cubby house” construction days. At the time this seemed that they were not taking the task seriously but by the end of design and construction phase there was a broad range of innovative solutions that responded to the circumstance and material in innovative ways.

The project has been repeated twice in 2009 and 2010. In observing the play like aspects of the first iteration we have since tightened the program so that it is very much like a game with quite rigidly defined parameters.

In essence the project asks students to design and make a shelter that they will inhabit for three days and two nights. The task is completed in groups of four. The cardboard is all of a standard specification; 2200 x 1100 x 7mm thick double corrugated stock. Each group is issued with 11 sheets of card with which to construct the shelter to house four adults along with all their gear. Groups are at liberty to coat the cardboard in any way they want and groups are allowed to use a single plastic sheet as a ground cover only.

Three aspects of the project invite deep engagement with the task and have the potential to generate *flow* within the participants. Firstly the task is aligned with the skill set of the participants. Most students have limited drawing and technical skills however the task does not demand high level of technical knowledge as the material properties are to a degree already known and a day’s worth of experimentation can uncover it other latent benefits. Though the skill level and technical knowledge required can be developed quickly, the challenge is adequately complex to allow the project to be situated within the *flow channel*.

Secondly there is an element of regression in the exercise that aligns itself with child like activities that in part helps to ease students’ self consciousness. Though it is an assessable activity the desire for grades is overtaken by the enjoyment of the task itself. The level of anxiety, analysis of criteria and want of continual feedback is curiously absent from the student cohort during the project.

Finally there is a game like quality to the exercise that invites friendly competition between teams. This is engendered by a clear and unambiguous understanding of the constraints (rules of the game) coupled with the equality of available resources. How much space can one group make compared to another under the same constraints? Who will be comfortable, who's shelter will last the distance, who's is the most interesting, most inventive? The immediate comparison allows each group to remain deeply focused on the activity but see as well the bigger picture.

The point of the exercise is not just simply to entertain students with a meaningless activity. As an introduction to design it engages students in understanding the fundamentals of shelter, anthropometrics, researching and testing material properties, innovation within material constraints, the importance of the detail, basic constructional and structural principles, working with models in an iterative process, bridging the gap between scales of design and testing assumptions with a full scale prototype and reflecting upon the observations and experiences.

III. BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Though exercises like the cardboard site pods easily invites comparisons to a game or play like behavior, are there occasions in other parts of design education where similar concepts can be exercised or is it just a one off?

Another way of looking at "serious" play may be to draw parallels with experiment. Experiment through trial and error acknowledges that failure is a necessary part of the sequence that ultimately leads to new knowledge. In a program of design, the extent to which we allow students to experiment without the fear of failure is significantly curtailed. Larger student cohorts and tight semester programs leave little room for rescue of student projects that have gone perhaps too far out on a limb.

Reconsidering how we assess work can perhaps invite a level of risk taking. The reality is outside of the academy, the valuing of creativity is diverse and its correlation with ascribing of value in the academy show few parallels. Simplified pass fail assessment allows the student cohort to remain on an equal footing, describing a high, minimum and perhaps diverse standard. It would allow students to go out on a limb knowing that if it did not quite work out but still met a passing standard that their value amongst peers would remain on a level footing.

An emphasis on professional preparedness imbues an orthodoxy that runs through the academy and underscores the expectations of the domain, rather than deliberately and perhaps irreverently or light heartedly challenging the orthodoxy. There is perhaps a balance between the view of the academy as an apprenticeship to one that supports risk taking in an environment that is to a large degree unshackled by the constraints of the profession.

Play is often described as voluntary and that a major component in the pleasure derived is the ability to join willingly and to leave willingly. There is a paradox in that playing the game often means playing by the rules and the members of the game agree and submit to those rules. A significant component of student satisfaction in a program is often correlated to the degree of control they have over their programs. Diminishing prior expectations and allowing all participants, including the catalyst of the game to negotiate and develop the terms of engagement provides at least one aspect of generating a play like activity that could lead to a greater level of engagement and flow.

Finally making "stuff" has both direct and longer term indirect benefits to creative thinking and problem solving. Though design students typically derive enjoyment from constructing their designs, seeing the transformation from idea to reality as tangible accomplishment that contributes to deep engagement and flow. On another level, working with your hands, discovering how things go together and to solve in three dimensions and improvise are important skills that feed back into virtual design based activities (Brown: 2009: 9)

Creativity and imagination are key attributes of budding designers and future professionals. It cannot be assumed that everyone entering the academy come equipped with these attributes and rather than taught, need to be drawn out. Play and aspects of play can be used as catalysts for activities that stimulate creativity. In parallel, we can break down the elements of play, flow and creativity and try and determine where the organizational structures of the academy are assisting or hindering creative processes.

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